



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Ice Age & North Country
National Scenic Trails
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IN REPLY REFER TO:

L7617(NOCO-MN)

xD18(NOCO-MN)

September 23, 2004

Memorandum

To: Regional Director, Midwest Region

From: Superintendent, Ice Age and North Country National Scenic Trails

Subject: Approval of Finding of No Significant Impact, Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment and Environmental Assessment, North Country National Scenic Trail (NST)

Enclosed for your approval and signature is the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment, North Country NST. Your approval of this document will conclude this planning effort and prepare the way for the next steps in adopting a revised route for the trail in Northeastern Minnesota, which will likely include some form of Congressional review and approval, possibly legislation. A copy of the Route Assessment and Environmental Assessment document and subsequent Errata are enclosed as background information.

As you know from previous briefings and your presence with us during the time we conducted the final public meetings, there is unanimous support from all sectors for making this change in the route. No one has voiced opposition. The only concern expressed was how long this process has taken to reach what to everyone seems an obvious decision (to change the route).

In anticipation that Congress may wish to express their approval through legislation, we have prepared the enclosed draft bill that would revise the route of the trail by substituting a new map of the route for the one cited in the original 1980 authorization. The Land Resources Division is preparing the new map. Specific references to the map in the draft bill can be filled in when their work is completed.

The next step, from our perspective, is preparing for and conducting the briefings in Washington that were suggested when we met with you, Dave Given, and Sandra Washington this past February 11. We will work with Al Hutchings to make arrangements for the briefings.

We look forward to your approval and completing the next steps to accomplish this change in the route of the North Country NST. Minnesota trail interests are eager to have this change declared official.

Thomas L. Gilbert

Enclosures:
Finding of No Significant Impact
Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment
Errata
Draft bill

North Country National Scenic Trail
Environmental Assessment
Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment

Finding of No Significant Impact

The purpose of the Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment was to reevaluate the currently authorized route of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NST) and examine alternatives. A revision to the current route was proposed by local and state officials and representatives of trail organizations, who believe that building the North Country NST in the corridor defined in the 1982 Comprehensive Plan for Management and Use of the North Country NST (CP) between Jay Cooke State Park (SP) and the Chippewa National Forest (NF) is inadvisable. Minnesota trail advocates recommended against developing that route because there are extensive Black Spruce/Tamarack wetlands that would make it difficult to construct trail and because the landscape is uninspiring.

The Preferred Alternative

The Preferred Alternative would amend the route identified in the CP for Northeastern Minnesota and follow three existing long-distance trails – Superior Hiking Trail, Border Route Trail, and Kekekabic Trail—and then seek to develop trail connections utilizing corridors to link those trails to the existing trail segments in Jay Cooke State Park and the Chippewa NF. This alternative incorporates over 300 miles of spectacular scenery along the three existing trails and offers the potential to develop additional trail in a landscape that contains significantly more uplands.

This alternative delineates corridors where future trail segments would be located and developed to connect the three existing trails with other existing portions of the North Country NST. There are two primary corridors where additional trail will need to be built:

- (1) Between Jay Cooke SP and Two Harbors, Minnesota--The Superior Hiking Trail Association is developing a trail southwestward from Two Harbors through the city of Duluth to Jay Cooke SP as an extension of the Superior Hiking Trail—a trail that already extends 200 miles northeastward from Two Harbors along the highlands near the shore of Lake Superior.
- (2) Between the end of the Kekekabic Trail east of Ely, Minnesota, and the Chippewa NF—A broad corridor is proposed that is defined by routes passing north and south of Vermilion Lake between Ely and McCarthy Beach SP, and incorporating sections of existing trail in the eastern Chippewa NF and community multi-use trails in Ely and Grand Rapids. This corridor rejoins the existing trail near Remer. This alternative combines the outstanding Lake Superior vistas of the Superior Hiking Trail, and the spectacular scenery of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness traversed by the Border Route and Kekekabic Trails.

Public Involvement

The National Park Service (NPS) issued a “Draft Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment and Environmental Assessment” for public review on May 26, 2004. The document was open for public comment for 35 days, until June 30. A total of 12 comments were received, none of which opposed the Preferred Alternative. Most were short notes endorsing the idea of using the three existing trails as part of the route of the North Country NST.

Public open house meetings were held in Bloomington, Grand Rapids, Ely, and Duluth. Attendees were enthusiastic about the prospect of relocating the route of the trail as proposed. We also received

suggestions for refining the Preferred Alternative by slightly widening the corridor shown on the map between McCarthy Beach SP and Grand Rapids.

Alternatives Considered

The NPS considered two alternatives: the Preferred Alternative, discussed above, and a No-action Alternative.

Under the No-action Alternative, the NPS would continue to work with public and private partners to locate and develop the trail as outlined in the 1982 CP. This alternative would route the trail generally westward from Jay Cooke SP, through Savanna Portage SP and Savanna State Forest (SF), and then westward to the eastern end of the existing North Country NST in the Chippewa NF south of Remer.

Environmental Consequences – Selected Alternative

As documented in the Environment Assessment (EA) and Errata, the NPS has determined that the Preferred Alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse impacts to soils, air quality, water resources, flood plains, wetlands, vegetation, fisheries, wildlife, threatened/endangered species, visual quality, aesthetics/recreation, wilderness, cultural resources, park management, or the local economy.

Allowing the North Country NST to follow the existing long-distance trails will have little additional impact on these already popular hiking trails. However, the recreational experience of the hikers on the North Country NST will be significantly enhanced by the vistas and environments traversed by these trails.

Where new trails need to be designed and built, additional consultation may be required to assure that trail development will not have adverse impacts. That consultation will be undertaken as trail plans are developed by local volunteers, land managers, and owners.

Cultural resources will be avoided where known and every effort will be made to include consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and appropriate Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs) at the earliest “scouting” phase of trail route selection to locate a route that does not have the potential to affect cultural sites. If, in the opinion of the land owner or manager, it is desirable to route the trail to visit particular cultural sites, the NPS will assist with interpreting the sites to trail users.

Wetlands will be avoided wherever possible to minimize impacts as well as construction costs and efforts. Unavoidable wetland crossings will be accomplished via elevated puncheon or boardwalk to minimize direct contact with the vegetation and to improve the aesthetics of the crossing.

Scenic and recreational values will be significant considerations in the design of new trail segments. To the extent possible, it is the goal of the NPS to provide the highest scenic and recreational values along the North Country NST. At the same time, the trail itself is designed to lie lightly on the land, both to minimize the effort required to construct the trail and to assure that the trail is unobtrusive.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

As stated in Section 2.7.D of *Director’s Order #12 and Handbook*, the environmentally preferred alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy expressed in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (Sec. 101 (b)). This includes alternatives that:

1. Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations.

2. Ensure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically- and culturally-pleasing surroundings.
3. Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences.
4. Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice.
5. Achieve a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities.
6. Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

The Preferred Alternative fully addresses the North Country NST's purpose to provide a high-quality hiking experience and safeguard vital natural and cultural resources. The NST was created to provide for the enjoyment of nationally significant scenic, historic, recreational, and cultural resources in seven northern states. Relocating the route of the NST to include the three existing long-distance hiking trails in Northeastern Minnesota reinforces that mission.

The Purpose of the North Country NST is:

To establish a trail within scenic areas of the Nation to provide increased outdoor recreation opportunities and promote preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the national scenic and historic resources.

To provide for superlative outdoor recreation opportunities and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural qualities of the areas through which the trail passes.

To provide a premier hiking trail facility and experience consistent with preserving the landscape in which the trail is established.

To encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance, and management of the trail, wherever appropriate.

The Preferred Alternative will not adversely affect the values of the existing trails and is supported by the members of the clubs that built and maintain these trails. Such cooperative efforts are encouraged by the National Trails System Act and NPS management policies. In addition, the Preferred Alternative is manageable and sustainable. Therefore, the Preferred Alternative is the environmentally preferred alternative.

The Preferred Alternative and Significance Criteria

As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse: A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

Implementation of the Preferred Alternative will produce long-term beneficial effects for hikers and the environment. The route avoids a corridor dominated by wetlands and follows three already-developed hiking trails. Where new connecting trail needs to be developed, there is proportionally less wetland and more available upland for trail location.

The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety:

The Preferred Alternative will enhance public health by bringing national recognition to the three existing long-distance trails and the outdoor recreation experiences they provide, as well as by adding over 300 miles of high-quality hiking trail to the North Country NST.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas

The Preferred Alternative will avoid cultural resource sites unless the manager of those resources requests that the trail be routed to those sites to interpret the story of a site for hikers. The SHPO was contacted and did not specifically comment on the plan, but the SHPO is interested in developing a programmatic agreement for planning future trail development with the NPS.

The Preferred Alternative calls for initially incorporating three existing trails which possess high-quality scenic resources and vistas into the route of the North Country NST. These trails will be extended through two connecting corridors containing additional outstanding scenic resources. Seven state parks are on the route of the present Superior Hiking Trail and additional state parks are within the potential route corridors and will be connected by the trail, if possible. There are no prime farmlands within the route. Wetlands will be avoided wherever possible and where wetlands must be traversed, they will be crossed utilizing elevated structures to minimize impacts. There are no national wild or scenic rivers that would be affected. Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) indicated that development of a hiking trail would have no impact on threatened or endangered species in the area.

The degree to which the effect on the quality of the human environment is likely to be highly controversial:

The Preferred Alternative is not controversial. It was supported by all comments received via the Internet, in writing, and orally. The only concern expressed by many of the people who attended the open house meetings related to the time it has taken for the NPS to complete the Route Assessment and propose relocating the route of the trail.

Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks:

The Preferred Alternative poses no effects of these types.

Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration:

The Preferred Alternative calls for trail development within identified corridors. When the trail route is "scouted," care will be taken to avoid known cultural resource sites and additional consultation will be done with the SHPO and various THPOs to avoid any new or potential cultural sites. Appropriate permits will be obtained for work in wetlands where those wetlands can not be avoided. Additional detailed planning may be done to assess impacts of specific trail segments if warranted. However, since the trail is to be routed away from culturally sensitive areas and wetlands, and since hiking trails have no impact on threatened or endangered species, it is unlikely that impacts will occur. Therefore, this action will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts:

As noted above, since new trail development will be sited to avoid areas where impacts can be anticipated and consultation with appropriate agencies will remain ongoing, it is unlikely that any significant cumulative impact will occur.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources:

The Preferred Alternative calls for the trail to avoid all known cultural resources unless the manager or others with responsibility for the resource desire the trail to connect to the site so that the resource can be interpreted for trail users. As more detailed "scouting" is undertaken, additional contacts with the SHPO and THPOs will be made to assure that new or potential cultural resources can be avoided. The 1854 Authority, an intertribal natural resource management organization, supported using existing trails where possible and the strategy of avoiding other cultural resources when developing additional trail. A copy of the draft document was provided to the Minnesota SHPO on May 23, 2004. In a telephone conversation with that office on August 13, 2004, the Minnesota SHPO advised the NPS that they had not been able to review the document to date and that the NPS could proceed.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat:

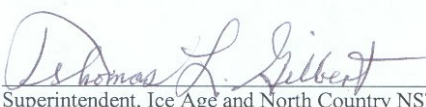

The FWS was consulted informally and the NPS received an electronic mail response on October 28, 2003, from the agency indicating that developing a hiking trail, whether the No-action or the Preferred Alternative, would have no impact on endangered or threatened species or critical habitat for them. This concluded the consultation with the FWS.

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state, or local environmental protection law:

The preferred alternative will not violate any Federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

The impacts resulting from the Preferred Alternative will not impair any park resource or value necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the trail's enabling legislation. The impacts documented in the EA and Errata and summarized above will not affect resources or values key to the natural, cultural, or recreational integrity of the trail or alter opportunities for enjoyment of the trail. This alternative will not impair park resources and will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

I find that the Preferred Alternative does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1500-1508), an environmental impact statement is not required and one will not be prepared.

Recommended:	 Superintendent, Ice Age and North Country NSTs	9/10/04 Date
Approved:	 Regional Director, Midwest Region	9/10/04 Date

